

WHAT IS CLAIMED IS:

1. A gaming machine adapted for accepting wagers and granting monetary awards, comprising:
 - a master gaming controller adapted to control game play and authorize payouts and other awards on said gaming machine;
 - one or more major components, wherein at least one of said one or more major components contains a plurality of peripheral devices and a first universal communication interface, is adapted to be removable from said gaming machine, and is interchangeable with other similar major components also so adapted; and
 - a universal gaming engine, said universal gaming engine having at least one dedicated processing unit, at least one associated storage device and a second universal communication interface, wherein said universal gaming engine is adapted to control a substantial portion of said plurality of peripheral devices on said removable and interchangeable major component.
2. The gaming machine of claim 1, wherein said removable and interchangeable major component is adapted to detach from both said gaming machine and said universal gaming engine.
3. The gaming machine of claim 2, wherein said universal gaming engine is adapted to remain attached to said gaming machine despite any detachment of said removable and interchangeable major component.

4. The gaming machine of claim 1, wherein said removable and interchangeable major component and said universal gaming engine are adapted to detach from said gaming machine as a combined unit.
5. The gaming machine of claim 4, wherein said removable and interchangeable major component is adapted to detach from said universal gaming engine.
6. The gaming machine of claim 1, wherein said removable and interchangeable major component comprises a top box.
7. The gaming machine of claim 6, wherein said universal gaming engine comprises a universal top box engine, said universal top box engine adapted to control a substantial portion of said plurality of peripheral devices on said top box.
8. The gaming machine of claim 1, wherein said removable and interchangeable major component comprises a main cabinet.
9. The gaming machine of claim 8, wherein said universal gaming engine comprises a universal main cabinet engine, said universal main cabinet engine adapted to control a substantial portion of said plurality of peripheral devices on said main cabinet.
10. The gaming machine of claim 1, wherein said universal gaming engine is adapted to control a substantial portion of a plurality of peripheral devices on a main cabinet and a substantial portion of a plurality of peripheral devices on a top box.

11. The gaming machine of claim 1, wherein said universal gaming engine contains a power supply adapted to provide power to said removable and interchangeable major component.
12. The gaming machine of claim 1, wherein said universal gaming engine comprises a communications buffer between said master gaming controller and a substantial portion of said plurality of peripheral devices on said removable and interchangeable major component.
13. The gaming machine of claim 1, wherein said dedicated processing unit comprises a central processing unit residing on said universal gaming engine.
14. The gaming machine of claim 13, wherein said central processing unit contains resident operating system code adapted to control functions within said universal gaming engine and facilitate communications between said universal gaming engine and said master gaming controller.
15. The gaming machine of claim 14, wherein said resident operating system code is specifically approved for use in a gaming machine by a gaming jurisdiction.
16. The gaming machine of claim 14, wherein said resident operating system code is selected from the group of operating system codes consisting of Windows CE Embedded, Windows XP, Linux, Monta Vista Linux, and QNX.

17. The gaming machine of claim 1, wherein said plurality of peripheral devices comprises one or more devices selected from the group consisting of a video display unit, a speaker, an audio amplifier, a light, a touch screen, an input button, a coin acceptor, a bill acceptor, a ticket acceptor, a coin hopper, a coin dispenser, a ticket printer, a card reader and a mechanical motor.

18. The gaming machine of claim 1, wherein said first universal communication interface mates with said second universal communication interface.

19. The gaming machine of claim 18, wherein said second universal communication interface comprises a standardized layout of physical connections that is consistent across a plurality of other universal gaming engines.

20. The gaming machine of claim 19, wherein said standardized layout of physical connections comprises a grid of ported connections.

21. The gaming machine of claim 19, wherein said standardized layout of physical connections comprises a power connection adapted to provide power across a mating of universal communication interfaces.

22. A gaming machine adapted for accepting wagers and granting monetary awards, comprising:

a processing means for controlling game play and authorizing payouts and other awards on said gaming machine;

a housing means for housing a plurality of peripheral devices associated with said gaming machine, said housing means being removable from said gaming machine and interchangeable with other similar housing means also so adapted; and

a universal engine means for controlling a substantial portion of said plurality of peripheral devices housed on said housing means, said universal engine means being physically separate from said housing means.

23. A system of gaming machines adapted for accepting wagers and granting monetary awards, comprising:

at least one computer server, said at least one computer server having a program adapted to provide data regarding individual universal gaming machine engines, major components of gaming machines, or both; and

a plurality of gaming machines in communication with said at least one computer server, wherein at least one first gaming machine of said plurality of gaming machines comprises

a master gaming controller adapted to control game play and authorize payouts and other awards on said gaming machine;

one or more major components, wherein at least one of said one or more major components contains a plurality of peripheral devices and a first universal communication interface, is adapted to be removable from said gaming machine, and is interchangeable with other similar major components also so adapted; and

a universal gaming engine, said universal gaming engine having at least one dedicated processing unit, at least one associated storage device and a second universal communication interface, wherein said universal gaming

engine is adapted to control a substantial portion of said plurality of peripheral devices on said removable and interchangeable major component.

24. The system of gaming machines of claim 23, wherein said data regarding individual universal gaming machine engines, major components of gaming machines, or both comprises one or more informational items for such devices selected from the group consisting of current location, past locations, time in service, number of retrofits, repair status, included peripheral devices, peripheral device configurations and overall thematic nature of the device.
25. The system of gaming machines of claim 23, wherein said removable and interchangeable major component is adapted to detach from said first gaming machine, said universal gaming engine, or both.
26. The system of gaming machines of claim 23, wherein said removable and interchangeable major component comprises a top box.
27. The system of gaming machines of claim 26, wherein said universal gaming engine comprises a universal top box engine, said universal top box engine adapted to control a substantial portion of said plurality of peripheral devices on said top box.
28. The system of gaming machines of claim 23, wherein said removable and interchangeable major component comprises a main cabinet.

29. The system of gaming machines of claim 28, wherein said universal gaming engine comprises a universal main cabinet engine, said universal main cabinet engine adapted to control a substantial portion of said plurality of peripheral devices on said main cabinet.

30. The system of gaming machines of claim 23, wherein said universal gaming engine is adapted to control a substantial portion of a plurality of peripheral devices on a main cabinet and a substantial portion of a plurality of peripheral devices on a top box of said first gaming machine.

31. The system of gaming machines of claim 23, wherein said dedicated processing unit comprises a central processing unit residing on said universal gaming engine, said central processing unit containing resident operating system code adapted to control functions within said universal gaming engine and facilitate communications between said universal gaming engine and said master gaming controller, wherein said resident operating system code is specifically approved for use in a gaming machine by a gaming jurisdiction.

32. The system of gaming machines of claim 23, wherein said first universal communication interface mates with said second universal communication interface, and wherein said second universal communication interface comprises a standardized layout of physical connections that is consistent across a plurality of other universal gaming engines.

33. A method of replacing a major component of a gaming machine adapted for accepting wagers and granting monetary awards, the method comprising:

providing a gaming machine having

a master gaming controller adapted to control game play and authorize payouts and other awards on said gaming machine,

one or more major components, wherein at least one of said one or more major components contains a plurality of peripheral devices and a first universal communication interface, is adapted to be removable from said gaming machine, and is interchangeable with other similar major components also so adapted, and

a universal gaming engine, said universal gaming engine having at least one dedicated processing unit, at least one associated storage device and a second universal communication interface, wherein said universal gaming engine is adapted to control a substantial portion of said plurality of peripheral devices on said removable and interchangeable major component;

removing a first major component from said gaming machine; and

installing a second major component to said gaming machine.

34. The method of claim 33, wherein said first major component comprises a top box.

35. The method of claim 34, wherein said universal gaming engine comprises a universal top box engine, said universal top box engine adapted to control a substantial portion of said plurality of peripheral devices on said top box.

36. The method of claim 33, wherein said first major component comprises a main cabinet.

37. The method of claim 36, wherein said universal gaming engine comprises a universal main cabinet engine, said universal main cabinet engine adapted to control a substantial portion of said plurality of peripheral devices on said main cabinet.

38. A method of changing a game theme on a gaming machine adapted for accepting wagers and granting monetary awards, the method comprising:

providing a gaming machine having

a master gaming controller adapted to control game play and authorize payouts and other awards on said gaming machine,

one or more major components, wherein at least one of said one or more major components contains a plurality of peripheral devices and a first universal communication interface, is adapted to be removable from said gaming machine, and is interchangeable with other similar major components also so adapted, and

a universal gaming engine, said universal gaming engine having at least one dedicated processing unit, at least one associated storage device and a second universal communication interface, wherein said universal gaming engine is adapted to control a substantial portion of said plurality of peripheral devices on said removable and interchangeable major component;

removing a first major component from said gaming machine, said first major component comprising one or more items dedicated toward a first game theme; and

installing a second major component to said gaming machine, said second major component comprising one or more items dedicated toward a second game different from said first game theme.